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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of the ethnographer's perspective in applying research knowledge to the improvement of educational practice. The Documentation and Technical Assistance Project (DTA) uses ethnographic methods to study problem solving in urban public schools. In the complicated culture of the urban school, social, economic and political forces, as well as educational considerations have an impact upon the course of school improvement. The field researcher finds difficulty communicating the contextual richness of this data when the technical assister is interested in a different type of data. The New York region of DTA has undertaken the task of facilitating a direct linkage between the holistic ethnographic perspective of the field researcher and the technical assister who delivers services based on these data. Preparation and synthesis seminars are used for effecting this linkage. In the preparation seminar, data are organized into thematic units. The emphasis is on preparing the data in such a way as to be useful to DTA technical assisters while preserving a critical consciousness of the context. In the synthesis seminars, researchers and technical assisters discuss their problems and consider alternative solutions and/or the application of relevant data for solving them. (Author/GC)

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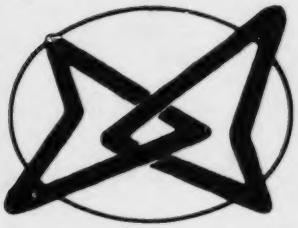

USING THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S PERSPECTIVE TO DIAGNOSE PROBLEMS IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE NEW YORK REGION OF DTA*

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This paper describes the use of the ethnographer's perspective to work at the solution of the problem of how to apply research knowledge to the improvement of educational practice.* The DTA Project uses ethnographic methods to study problem solving in urban public schools. It focuses on understanding how to enhance the capacity of schools to solve problems through utilization of knowledge from research and from the experience of educational practitioners. In the course of our work we are coming to realize that ethnographic methodology is useful in the solution of the very problem it studies.

Our field research has shown us that the culture of the urban school is complicated. Social, economic and political forces as well as educational considerations have an impact upon the course of school improvement. These forces are revealed by the ethnographic approach which assumes, in contrast to more traditional methodologies, that the acquisition and application of information

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is embedded in the context from which it is obtained. Because of its holistic research perspective, the ethnographic approach to schools sees everything in relation to everything else and reflects upon the consequences of actions aimed at parts of the whole on the whole.

In communicating research findings for use, researchers feel that they must present their data with the contextual richness intact, because only then is the meaning preserved. For the technical assister the problem is one of applying the field information from one context to another in the creation of appropriate assistance strategies. Often strategies are created and implemented without thorough consideration of contextual forces. This circumvention of a conscious process of problem diagnosis may leave deeper seated problems untouched. Thus the critical awareness of the contextual relevance of information makes its translation and transformation for use in another context an extremely difficult task.

The difficulties which result from lack of adequate translation and transformation commonly beset both practitioners and technical assisters. Problems stated by practitioners requesting assistance do not usually constitute fully diagnosed problems. Technical assisters find themselves responding to practitioner's requests for specific programs or services because of the solution this immediate

response gives to their mutual needs to assist and to be assisted. In satisfying without delay the needs of both technical assisters and practitioner clients this approach may fail to implement assistance so as to have a lasting impact on the school.

Practitioners, on the other hand, experience disappointment with assistance results which occur when problems are not contextually diagnosed. When they do not attend to complex contextual issues, outside consultants to practitioners are wont to diagnose problems so that they fit their own values, skills, special interests, experience and available solution strategies. The attempted solutions then do not provide practitioners with lasting or ultimately useful solutions to urban school problems.

The New York Region of DTA has undertaken the task of facilitating a direct linkage between the holistic ethnographic perspective of the field researcher (information acquisition) and the technical assister who delivers services based on these data (information application). Because of the complexity of the issues involved, this particular linkage between research and practice is done in two phases: first, a preparation and then, a synthesis seminar.

In the preparation seminar, data are organized into thematic units: Teachers as Professionals, Accessibility of the School to The Community, The School as a Well-Functioning Organization and The Principal as Educational Leader. Site researchers from the

nine funded sites, school practitioners from the funded sites, parents, teachers, consultants and other members of the research team have been participants in the preparatory seminars. As participants, they discuss and organize data around themes (mentioned above), that stand out as important aspects of their experience with school problem solving or improvement. During these seminars, data from the various sites are discussed.

Participants point out similarities and highlight the influence of contextual forces thereby enhancing their own ability to analyze events from the standpoint of contextual awareness. The emphasis is on preparing the data in such a way as to be potentially useful to DTA technical assisters while preserving a critical consciousness of the ecology.

Since information in and of itself may be of little use in the dynamics of reconsidering technical assistance, the face-to-face communication of data in a supportive atmosphere is the second phase of the process. We have noted in doing the field research that for a consultant to be of use to a client, not only must the information conveyed be useful, but the client must actively participate in the planning and implementation of solutions. In order to facilitate this activity, it is imperative that the consultant understand the client's contextual field.

Our solution to this problem is in contrast to the usual work of the researcher who engages in the construction of abstract models drawn from data. Instead, our task is to engage in a dialogue with assisters around their problems, and to use the ethnographic research skills of the field workers, including knowledge gained from the data and from other experience, to identify problems, note similarities and differences between research and TA sites, and consider alternative solutions and/or the application of relevant data in light of problems.

In one such seminar, two DTA technical assisters were asked to tell project researchers about their problem around parent involvement in a school. During the discussion the initial view of the problem was: "how do you construct a mini-school for parents?" A little later on in the discussion the problem became: "what should such a mini-school look like?" It was only after inquiry about the changes and influences occurring in the school and the district that we learned that the problem had a more significant dimension. The root of the problem was a view of parents as the cause of their children's academic failure because of their own academic deficits and their lack of understanding or appreciation of the school's efforts to teach basic skills.

We knew that we had identified a significant dimension of the problem when the technical assister who had to deal with it

said that the diagnosis made sense. But we also knew that because the seminars are out of context with the assistance site, the assister would have to pursue the diagnosis further, preferably with the people at the site.

The dialogue in the seminars effects both technical assisters and researchers. Researchers are helped to move beyond the individualism, competition and isolation that a non-problem oriented approach tends to impose on them. They begin to question how to conduct research that will preserve the ethnographic perspective and still be readily useful in delivering assistance to schools. Although site researchers may disagree on theoretical frameworks and philosophies, when it comes to developing approaches to solutions for real life problems, virtually everyone understands the contradictions in the technical assistance situation, is sympathetic to its dilemmas, and is able to offer something to help understand or resolve the problem. Seminars also clarify the biases and value orientations of both researchers and technical assisters. Synthesis seminars are an attempt to have technical assisters adopt the orientation of the ethnographer and for researchers to become more aware of the transformation of data for use.

Because assistance and on-going research are dynamic, we are suggesting that the relationship between ethnographic research and action can be facilitated by researchers understanding and helping

technical assisters to understand the context of the assistance field and/or to teach the assister the skills of systematically examining the context and methods of problem probing other than survey instruments. Researchers can raise questions about the meaning of a particular change strategy or innovation. They can provide data on situations through quantitative as well as qualitative data collection methods which can help school or change agents plan, make decisions and take action. Researchers can provide ideas, strategies, alternatives and conceptual frameworks as guides to implementation activities. Assisters and researchers can exchange ideas about existing theory and/or develop new theory applicable to delivering technical assistance. They can share the responsibility for research and action.

In situations such as our synthesis seminars, researchers move in the direction of being included in practice rather than being observers of it and assisters move in the direction of observing action, becoming ethnographers of their own problem-filled contexts and using these data to enhance their capacities to diagnose and solve their problems.

Thus, the work of the New York region of DTA is an innovative approach in its use of the methodology of the anthropologist in the study and the implementation of technical assistance in urban schools. We have found the seminars to provide a useful meeting ground for the communication of ideas and perspectives between researchers and assisters and view it as a model for working with school practitioners.